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SANFORD UNGAR: For several months now, former supporters of General Anastasio Somoza have attacked Nicaragua from bases in Honduras, reportedly with political and financial support from the United States and Argentina. These groups oppose the revolution and still hope to bring down the Sandinista government.

But there's also a group of political opponents to the government who fought in the revolution against Somoza. They became part of the government, but now are disenchanted and believe that the goals of the revolution have been betrayed.

The Nicaraguan Ambassador to the United States recently resigned for just that reason.

SUSAN STAMBERG: The recognized leader of former Sandinista supporters who oppose the government is Aden Pastora. He's a hero of the revolution and the leader of one of the most daring exploits in the battle against Smomoza.

NPR's Bill Busenberg and Peter Breslow visited Pastora's mountaintop headquarters near San Jose, Costa Rica and filed this report on the man who has become an important wild card in Central American politics.

BILL BUSENBERG: Pastora's headquarters is in a seven acre compound overlooking San Jose. As our jeep twisted and swerved along the narrow road to the compound's guarded gates, I thought of the international image of Aden Pastora, better known as Commander Zero. That image, in main, stemmed from a successful assault on Nicaragua's National Palace in 1978. Two

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dozen commandos took over the building then and held 1,000 hostages, including most members of Congress. Negotiations led to an exchange, the hostages for a ransom, some Sandinista prisoners and a free flight to Havana.

At the time, no one knew who the commandos were. They wore masks and called each other by numbers instead of names. Their leader was known only as Commandante Zero, Commander Zero. That was until just before boarding the plane to Cuba. Then Pastora turned to photographers, raised his rifle over his head and tore away his mask. That gesture of triumph marked him as the most famous Sandinista leader.

The compound itself rests on a quiet hillside. Within its fenced perimeter, the mood is fairly relaxed, despite well-armed soldiers visible at the entrance and elsewhere. Grassy grounds and gravel walks give it more the air of a political retreat than a military command center. That's also in keeping with requirements made by the Costa Rican government allowing Pastora to stay in the country.

The compound was loaned to him by a friend. So were numerous jeeps. The main house is an old two story villa. It stands next to an unused, half-empty swimming pool.

Inside the house live six of Pastora's eight children, his wife and several other relatives and aides. Styrofoam Christmas decorations hang from the walls. Pastora comes down the stairs to greet us wearing an open shirt and slacks. He has a well-built, stocky frame, strong looking face, dark hair parted down the middle, slightly graying on the sides.

Eden Pastora is 46 now, having spent half his life as a guerrilla leader. He was an early friend of Che Guevara's. Following the successful Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua in 1979, Pastora worked in the new government for two years as Deputy Minister of Defense. But then last year, disillusioned with what he perceived was the overly dogmatic course of the Sandinista revolution, Pastora quit, went into exile, first living in Panama, then here in Costa Rica. He doesn't talk much about that celebrated palace takeover now. His only comment when we spoke was that others have since tried to copy his commando action in Colombia and in Spain, but they didn't succeed. "Let's see," he joked, "how long will I hold the record."

Pastora invited us to join him for lunch at the family table: Costa Rican Kentucky fried chicken from a red and white box, Coca-Cola, French fries, figs and coffee. During the meal, he spoke about his own political views, favoring a third way for Nicaragua -- revolutionary; that is vaguely socialist, but truly non-aligned.

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"I'm a leftist, but I don't like extremists. I don't believe extremists serve the national interest, like true Sandinistas would, right? That's why some say I'm a communist. Others say I'm a rightist, because I'm a true Sandinista.

"First, I'm a nationalist. Second, third and always, a Nicaraguan. I'm against the CIA, the KGB, against even my companarios in Cuba, though I appreciated their help. But first, I support the national interest."

After Pastora left Nicaragua and announced his opposition to the government, his former colleagues in the National Directorate made it a crime to mention or publish his name, and they sought to discredit him in other ways, calling Pastora an egocentric adventurer and saying he wasn't competent as a government official.

When I asked Pastora what kind of following he thought he still had in Nicaragua, he replied instantly "Two million people," almost the entire population. When I questioned him further, he said I'd be convinced of his popularity and the regime's unpopularity if I went to Nicaragua. Others who have travelled there recently say it's hard to tell how much support Pastora still has, though he does have some. There are reports of signs on walls saying "Eden, your militia is waiting for you." Yet there are also reports that many Nicaraguans have adopted the government's position, that Pastora is a traitor to the revolution. I asked him about that charge.

"The people of Nicaragua, who are infallible and who don't make mistakes and who have a great judge in whom I put my trust, they know I'm not a traitor, that the traitors are the National Directorate. The people of Nicaragua know that I continue to defend the same principles as always -- freedom of the press, free elections, mixed economies, ideological pluralism. They know who's betrayed the country and the revolution by the way the Directorate has aligned itself with the Soviets. Calling me a traitor is just propaganda that hasn't caught on in Nicaragua."

Pastora's greatest complaint against the National Directorate is that they've destroyed the popular Sandinista revolution. It's his view that they've overturned the democratic goals of the revolution by delaying free elections and that they've handed over Nicaraguan support to the Soviet Union for nothing, except arms.

Meanwhile, he says, most of the country's economic aid has come from Western countries. Those countries are beginning to withdraw their support now, and the Directorate has few lasting investments to show for that aid. Unemployment is

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rising, wages are falling sharply, and the Directorate, Pastora says, has no solution but to blame others and to fall back on their ideology, which is leading to a more rigid totalitarian state.

Pastora also has a moral critique. He charges that unlike Cuba's leaders, the Nicaraguan Directorate has chosen to live like kings amid growing scarcity, isolating themselves even more from ordinary Nicaraguans.

"All the nine members of the National Director grab mansions and live like super-bourgeoisie. They've made themselves a political oligarchy. They want Mercedes Benz, Jaguars, BMWs, all of them. Their freezers are full of food, lobsters, shrimp, Grade-A beef, imported wines and whiskey. They live from one day to the next, adopting the conduct of Somoza's generals, who exploited us. I've never seen in such a short time corruption like that of these revolutionary leaders."

Outside the house, during a break in our interview, we went on a tour of Pastora's compound. There were fields for growing fruits and vegetables, chicken coops where chicks were being hatched; two new barracks where some 40 soldiers ate, slept and played games like ping-pong to pass the time.

In one of the barracks, Pastora showed us some of his weapons, old bolt action Belgian rifles, as well as new Soviet made AK-47s, said to be the best assault weapons in the world. There was some military training taking place in the compound, but it seemed to be mostly in line with guard duty, an important function. Pastora has been in this compound only three months, but in that time his aides say there have been two infiltrators sent to assassinate him.

Arturo Cruz, a former official of the Sandinista government who is now working with Pastora and finishing an American doctorate, says Pastora has a special way of treating infiltrators, a method that says something about his much remarked charisma.

ARTURO CRUZ: He lets them see him. And after a while he tells them, "Well, if you want to kill me, kill me, or do whatever you want to. But first, look at me. And if you think I'm honest, stay with me." That's the way he handles them.

BUSENBERG: And what happened to the two infiltrators?

CRUZ: They have remained. It's amazing. And you know, they call them FBI, CIA infiltrators, you know, whatever, you know. They kid around with them, you know. And one of them started crying about a week and a half ago when he said "I didn't

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know what I was doing, you know, until I came here and I saw you. And after two months of being here, and I had the intention to kill you, now it's a different situation." It's incredible. I mean clearly, of course, sometimes I wonder what will happen to him. And I think that most likely he'll be killed. But perhaps that's the way history goes. Perhaps that's his destiny. Very tragic.

But I hope that that's not the case, clearly, [that] he takes care of himself.

BUSENBERG: The soldiers in the compound are mostly former Sandinistas, many of whom fought before under Pastora. In separate interviews, the men told my colleague, Peter Breslow, why they were there. These hardline responses were typical.

MAN [Translated]: My profession is in the military. I deserted the army and came here because I didn't like the orders the Directorate gave. They tell you to kill peasants, to burn their houses and destroy them. I think there's a horrendous crime taking place there. Thousands of my companeros are in the army there. And if they haven't come here already, they're prepared to hear the call of our commander.

MAN [Translated]: I belonged to the 9013 Battalion. I saw that the steps of the Sandinista Front were not toward freedom, but rather oppression. We fought during the time of Somoza because it was a dictatorship. Before there was one dictator, now there're nine.

I was in the mountains in 1980 and '81, fighting without any real direction. No one knew who our commander, Eden Pastora, was or what he was going to do. Now I find myself here with him, ready to fight until the last moment, offering my life to my people, but carrying a gun in my hands, because there will not be Marxist communism in Nicaragua.

MAN [Translated]: I think that I will reach Nicaragua and liberate it so that there will be democracy and that there will be free elections and so we'll become free, that there'll be no oppression, and that it will be a sovereign, democratic country.

BUSENBERG: The men around him may be ready to go to war against the National Directorate, but Pastora says he is not. A physical war, no; a political war, yes.

Inside his panelled office, Pastora sits at a desk with five telephones, one of which is always interrupting. Communications, Pastora says, are very important. He also operates a radio station from here to broadcast into Nicaragua.

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On the wall around him are detailed maps of the Nicaraguan border, along with stacks of walkie-talkies and batteries. For the immediate future, Pastora's strategy seems to be to launch some kind of vague diplomatic offensive against the Nicaraguan Directorate. He wants to travel soon to the United States and talk with supporters in Congress and go to the United Nations, and then go on to Western Europe, where he believes he has considerable Social Democratic support for this third way, non-aligned views.

Through such travels, Pastora hopes to exert outside pressure on the Directorate to purge its more hardline leaders, possibly through direct negotiations with him and his allies. Again, military actions, Pastora says, are not yet part of his plans.

"We haven't taken a single military action that's resulted in bloodshed. If we were guerrillas, as they've portrayed us, lovers of war, we would have already had battles along the borders or inside the country. And we would have killed peasants and committed other stupid acts. But not us. We don't want war. We don't want it because we know what it is, and we're doing everything humanly possible and exhausting all our political options in order not to arrive at that extreme."

BUSENBERG: However, many consider Pastora's outside political strategy futile, because it isn't matched by any activity inside the country. Pastora says he's going to set up operations soon somewhere closer to Nicaragua, possibly inside the country. Such a move will be difficult. Costa Rica won't allow him to base a more active operation in their territory, and the fighting taking place along the Honduras border complicates a move there. Pastora has twice gone to Honduras in the last few months to talk to officials, but apparently they won't allow him to operate with only his forces, and Pastora won't join forces with the former National Guardsmen operating in Honduras. That would be impossible, he says. "Guardar" (?) is a dirty word.

"Look, for me to work with the counterrevolution would be like thinking God can make a square circle. Why? Because it's against my nature. In the first place, those guards assassinated the Nicaraguan people. They committed the most shocking genocide in all of Latin America barely three years ago. And I fought against them for 23 years. These guards are the same ones who assassinated my father when I was seven."

It appears it will never happen. But the United States and the former guardsmen would welcome Pastora's leadership. There are reports they've been seeking just that, since Pastora's support would lend their effort legitimacy and credibility it now lacks. However, Pastora sees the American supported attacks by

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the former Guard as totally counterproductive. He says they're the only reasons the National Directorate is still in power.

"I've said that if it weren't for the guards in Honduras, a fly in the ear of a monkey would last longer than the Directorate in power. The day they remove the guards is the day we overthrow the Directorate in less time than anyone can imagine."

Pastora says there's a kind of symbiotic relationship between the Reagan administration and the Nicaraguan Directorate. The United States, he says, can point to the excesses of the Sandinista Directorate to discredit other revolutionary movements and justify American support for the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala. On the other hand, the Sandinista Directorate can take advantage of American supported actions by the National Guard to justify their internal limitations on basic political freedoms.

"The Reagan administration has to thank the National Directorate for this, and the National Directorate has to thank Reagan for his constantly menacing posture. And so they're exchanging favors. It's the dialectic of extremes: the error of one justifies the error of the other. They complement each other."

Whether or not he has analyzed the situation correctly, it's clear there is a cross-fire between the Reagan administration and the National Directorate, and Pastora and other critics are caught in it, unable so far to exert change within the country or halt the attacks from outside of it. When you ask Pastora if he's being naive to keep trying, he laughs. There was a time, he says, when nobody thought the Sandinistas had a chance. They won. But now the Directorate has given their revolution a bad name.

What Pastora is trying to do, he says, is simply rescue that popular Sandinista revolution and return it to its politically pluralist path. The Nicaraguan people are with him in that, he says, and they're much more politically conscious now of their own interests.

As we were leaving the compound, Arturo Cruz explained why he thinks Pastora has at least a chance to succeed. Cruz says Pastora's more Nicaraguan than the National Directorate.

CRUZ: He's a feeling. He's a sentiment. I think he's very, very Nicaraguan. And that's his great asset, and perhaps his great liability too. Sometimes people say he's not very coherent, and he may not be, because he is a sentiment, he's a feeling. He expresses something that you have -- you cannot

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conceptualize; you can only sense it. He is the last Sandinista, you know, in the true sense of the word, in the Sandino of the '30s, you know. Sometimes he reminds me of Zapata, very close to the land, without much sophistication, you know. And that may be unacceptable to intellectuals of the West who are from leftist preferences. But that, in fact, is, I think, his principal asset.

BUSENBERG: With Peter Breslow, I'm Bill Busenberg reporting.

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